

To: COA Codes and Ordinances Committee
From: Charles M Mansfield, Austin resident
May 17, 2017

This letter is to express my opposition to changing the 3/4th rule currently applied to the Austin Landmark Commission's historic zoning recommendations. Those who wish to change this rule are looking for a new tool to slow gentrification. This would constitute the misuse of Historic designation for non-historic purposes, and is harmful to Austinites for the following reasons:

1) Preventing demolition of old houses will cause financial harm to the low-income owners (or their heirs) who wish to sell them. Many of the homes being demolished in Central Austin are being sold by elderly, lower-income owners who wish to move closer to their adult children, or are being sold by the owner's heirs after their death – many of whom are also low-income. The value of their homes will be greatly diminished if potential buyers are not allowed to demolish the house. This harms the long-time, lower-income residents that you are trying to protect.

2) Misuse of Historic designation means more residents will be living in obsolete, unsafe and energy-wasting houses, which causes harm to them and to all Austin residents. Old houses are not built to current building codes. They are less safe, less energy efficient, and require more upkeep. My son and daughter-in-law purchased a 1940's house in Crestview. They demolished it and built a modest 1-story house of an architectural style that was appropriate for the neighborhood. They now have a family. The new house uses less energy than the old house, and they were not forced to move to the suburbs to start a family, adding to road congestion. This helps all Austin residents.

3) Misusing Historic designation as a back-door means to slow gentrification infringes on owner's property rights, and will serve to justify intervention by the State Legislature. Don't give them a legitimate reason to take away more of our local control. Already, the Historic Landmark Commission and the Board of Adjustments have a history of making inconsistent and arbitrary decisions. In one case a person is allowed a variance or a demolition permit, in a nearly identical a different applicant is not given the permit. This is bad governance, and can be used to justify intervention by the legislature. The 3/4th rule helps to reduce these arbitrary and unfair decisions which, inevitably, will occur if the decision to apply Historic designation can be reached by a simple majority. Do not allow the ludicrous application of Historic designation to properties clearly do not meet the spirit of Historic Preservation. Austinites will suffer for it.

I have lived in Austin for 50 years. Economic and social changes over these decades are straining many of my friends and family members - and me as well. I own an old house that I would never think of tearing down. But I fear city commissioners who would impose Historic designation on houses that clearly do not warrant it, over the wishes of its owners.

Charley Mansfield